

TITLE: The DI's Organizational Culture

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~~Confidential~~*How to succeed and survive*

The DI's Organizational Culture

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Organizations, like societies, have cultures. These cultures reflect the organization's mission and how its employees carry it out. The culture of an organization also exerts a powerful influence on the job satisfaction of its employees. When we feel in harmony with the values and workstyle of our organization, we are likely to be productive and satisfied. When our work preferences, personal values and attitudes conflict with those of our organization, our lives in the workplace can be miserable and extremely stressful.

An organization's culture often manifests itself in a distinct professional personality—a set of common work norms, attitudes and behaviors—found in a majority of its professionals. These personalities have their roots in early training and job experiences, and they are reinforced through countless repetitions of routine activities. They are what distinguish us from our colleagues even in closely related sister organizations. Journalist Arthur Hadley describes a woman who operates her own computer research firm who says she can tell within minutes whether an interviewee was trained at IBM, Apple, Hewlett-Packard, or some other major computer firm. Hadley also describes the differences in outlook, behavior, and values that clearly distinguish Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force officers from each other.¹ Our own experience within the CIA's four directorates makes the same point. Ask a member of the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), the Directorate of Operations (DO), the Directorate of Science and Technology (DS&T), or the Directorate of Administration (DA) what

are the three most important elements of their mission. You will be lucky if there is any convergence.

As an outsider, my sense of the culture in the DO, the DA, or the DS&T is highly impressionistic. But I have experienced the DI's culture firsthand, and I believe that the directorate and the personality it spawns have been shaped by a number of features of our work.

The Analysis Business

Analysis is what the DI does for a living. We research, analyze and write about some of the most complex issues one can imagine, including wars; the intentions and capabilities of foreign adversaries; political succession, turmoil, and change; the world economy; technology transfer; and the international narcotics network. This work invariably is done with incomplete information and a substantial degree of uncertainty. It is often like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle without the box-top picture as a guide, without all the straight-edge pieces to provide the picture's exact width and depth, and without all the internal pieces. There are always parts of the picture that are unknown, and we can only speculate about them.

We also are paid to make judgments about the future and to predict what is likely to happen, not simply to describe what has occurred. We are expected to know our history and to be familiar with the current facts about our accounts; our analysis must address the meaning of those facts for the future and for the US.

This business of analysis dictates the combination of education and intellectual skills we look

¹ Arthur T. Hadley, "The Split Military Psyche," *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 July 1986, pp. 26-32.

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Culture

for in the people we hire. It also shapes our daily routine—read, think, communicate verbally, and write a lot. More important, it shapes the way we look at ourselves and the mental habits that mark us as analysts.

In the DI, we take great pride in our ability to think critically about issues, to ask the right questions, to be objective, to see issues from a number of perspectives, and to marshal evidence in support of our conclusions. We also pride ourselves on being intellectually honest. We call the shots as we see them, regardless of any partisan political considerations or pressures. As a group, we are a tough-minded and critical lot, always ready to do battle with words and ideas. We are as quick to challenge anyone else's conclusions and arguments as we are to defend our own. While we see ourselves as being open-minded empiricists, at times we can also be defensive, intellectually arrogant, and overly cynical. We often find it easier to be neutral or negative than to be upbeat and optimistic. To survive in this culture, intellectual robustness, self-confidence, resiliency, and assertiveness are essential.

The Communications Business

The communications business, which also preoccupies most DIers, forms the other important component of our mission. In a sense, we are only paid half our salaries for doing our analysis. We earn the other half by communicating the policy-relevant portions of that analysis to those who need to know it.

Our communications requirements are just as demanding and difficult as our analytic mission. But the talents they require are quite different from those that define a good analyst. The professional education of a communications specialist stresses knowledge of the various media, audience analysis, and the art of packaging and delivering a message. Effective communicators are often introverted and similar in personality type to their colleagues in the business world. On the other hand, the college course work of the typical political or

economic analyst emphasizes concepts, theories, models and comparative analysis—magnets for the introverted. Their natural colleagues are academics, not entrepreneurs. The successful DI officer has to find a way to merge both the analytic and communications professions.

In the communications business, we compete with other intelligence agencies for the policymaker's attention and time, and we are often competing with the policymaker's own views. Success requires constant attention to our consumer: What is it he or she wants and needs to know? We also have to know something about how our consumer thinks and takes in information, if we are to succeed in getting our message across. While we are not in the business of telling the policymaker what he or she wants to hear, we want to be sure that the consumer hears what we have to say—like it or not.

The "DI style" is the most conspicuous element of our culture that derives from the communications dimension of our work. It includes presenting conclusions first; using tight, logical organization; emphasizing brevity and clarity of expression; describing the evidence; and providing a precise analytic bottom line. These elements are all designed to ensure the most effective and persuasive communication of our message. The singularity of the DI product reflects the powerful influence of this dimension of our culture.

Few, however, come to the DI as polished communicators. Our people are hired primarily for their area expertise and analytic skills, not for their ability to identify and assess an audience or to package and market an analytic product. Most of us have to learn these skills on the job. Over time, we master the formats—intelligence assessments, typescripts, current features and items, briefings—and the presentational tricks of the trade. We also should grow more adept at anticipating and responding to our consumers' needs. While the learning process can be painful, we have discovered the same verity as our colleagues

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in the newspaper, radio, and television worlds: he who ignores what the customer wants and how he wants it will lose that customer.

A Corporate Product

Some years ago, a colleague and I produced a paper that was handed directly to the President by his National Security Adviser with the following advice: "Mr. President, you really must read this nice piece that Bill's folk"—here he reportedly pointed to then Director William Casey—"out at the Agency prepared." From an analyst's point of view, that is high praise for the relevancy of a paper. It certainly represents getting to our most senior customer. But I have always been more intrigued by the phrase "Bill's folk." It conjures up images of a band of Keebler elves running around Langley producing cute little papers that our avuncular director takes to the President. Over the years, I have come to appreciate how that simple phrase effectively captures how we are viewed downtown. To most of our customers, we are "Bill's folk" or the "Judge's people," with our product representing the Agency and the directorate as a whole. Good papers reflect favorably on all of us, and the bad ones make us all look just a little suspect. We are, in effect, a corporate enterprise.

Think about how we do our work. Others collect and often control most of the data we use. There are always multiple sources of in-house expertise on any subject with whom we should collaborate, and most of them will officially get involved in coordinating any finished piece of intelligence concerning their substantive area. Then there is the review process at the branch, division, office and directorate levels. At the lower levels, the product is primarily scrutinized for substantive accuracy and presentational clarity. At the upper levels, the focus shifts slightly to policy relevancy, comprehensiveness, and message clarity. Once a paper leaves our building, it in theory represents the best thinking the DI collectively can muster on that subject.

And how does the individual analyst fare in this process? A few get lost, most find a reasonably

comfortable niche, and many thrive. Much hinges on each analyst's ability to comprehend the corporate nature of our production process and to make it work for him or her. Pride of individual authorship and expertise, while important, is never an appropriate end in itself. The name of the game is steering one's product through the process while ensuring that the basic thrust of one's analytic message remains intact. It is a lot like a Congressman's challenge in steering a bill through the legislative process; the effort is complex, lengthy, multilayered, and filled with pitfalls. Nevertheless, the effort is essential if we are to communicate analysis to our customers.

To succeed in the DI environment, an analyst has to have or develop strong interpersonal skills. He or she also has to understand that the requirements for working within a hierarchical power structure—the ability to give and take orders—are quite different from those needed to survive in situations where power and authority are structured horizontally. We cannot order a co-equal colleague to agree with us, we have to convince him or her. This often requires a willingness to bargain, persuade, and compromise.

It takes time, hard work, and determination to develop the skills needed to master the ins and outs of a corporate production process. Although it is often stressful and frustrating, most survive and learn. A great many regularly gripe and complain, a defining characteristic of the DI personality. To one such litany of complaints, a former Deputy Director for Intelligence once provided the following corporate response: "I'm not sure 'we' should trust the analysis of a complex international problem to someone who can't even master his own production process."

Publish or Perish

During my years in the academic world, my colleagues and I spent many hours discussing the "publish or perish" phenomena. We had all been conditioned in graduate school to accept it as essential for survival. In truth, as most of us

came to realize, the phenomena was more fiction than fact at most American institutions of higher learning. Effective classroom performance and service to the university community were equally, if not more, important.

When I joined the DI, however, I quickly learned that I had entered a world where publication really was essential to survival. No analyst makes it in the DI without successfully putting pen to paper from time to time. In fact, analysts establish their bona fides both with their managers and their colleagues primarily through the written word; to be taken seriously, you have to show you can do what everybody else has to do.

The production files maintained for each DI analyst symbolize the importance of establishing a "paper trail" of one's analytic performance. Much like baseball players, we are judged in part by our statistics—not exact numbers but the ranges. Over time, we all know our publication numbers have to be respectable across the various types of written production.

Unfortunately, writing publishable analytic prose—like hitting or pitching a baseball—is not easy. No matter how much some analysts want to or how hard they try, they never master the art. Moreover, there is something so final and intellectually threatening about putting your thoughts on paper and handing them to someone else for evaluation—if you avoid the batter's box you cannot strike out. But all DI analysts have to write, and that is pressure. And the better you hit, the more times you will be sent to the plate. Although you may get used to the pressure, it never goes away.

Get It Right

"Sadat will not recognize Israel."
"The Shah will not fall."
"The Soviets will not pull out of Afghanistan."
"Nothing ever happens in Eastern Europe."

Each of these statements is a judgment no DI analyst ever wanted associated with his or her

name. Still, making judgments is what we are paid for, and the law of averages mandates that some will be wrong. In theory, of course, we can be wrong for the right reasons or wrong because we lacked the right information. But wrong is wrong, and we all know about long memories and the visual acuity of hindsight.

Every DI analyst regularly experiences the pressure of not wanting to be wrong. Consequently, the good ones develop techniques for reducing the risks through research habits, collaborative analysis, alternative hypothesis exploration, retesting assumptions, and challenging the conventional wisdom. They also master the watchwords of caution—might, could, possibly, however, on the other hand. Yet, in the end, there are no guarantees. Thus, is it any wonder that the DI analytic cadre is a conservative lot? Who among us would agree with the notion that a .500 analytic batting average qualifies us for the analyst's hall of fame?

Importance of Timing

If we only wrote for ourselves, or if our analysis was mainly for posterity, the issue of timeliness would be irrelevant. But we write for busy policymakers who "need it when they need it." This is especially true of current intelligence, which is needed at the opening of the day's business. Analysis that arrives too early—or worse, too late—will usually have minimal impact. Consequently, the timeliness of our analytic efforts can mean everything.

Most of us who have been around for a while can relate a war story or two about a colleague whose analysis hit at just the right time and made a significant difference in the policy process. We remember these times because praise and promotions often follow. Unfortunately, we probably can also recall a few topnotch analytic efforts that disappeared into some black hole once they left the building. In many cases, the timing was not right.

It often helps that our consumers' lives are heavily driven by their calendars. Heads of state

meetings, summits, ministerials, policy review gatherings, foreign travel, international conferences, and negotiating rounds are usually scheduled well in advance. When we are lucky, a customer will actually tell us what is on his or her mind so we can be both timely and relevant.

Nevertheless, timeliness is not an exact science, and we often find ourselves rushing to meet a deadline imposed by unforeseen events. If we miss the deadline, it almost certainly will mean missing the intelligence boat and a chewing out. We also frequently find ourselves squeezed between two deadlines, neither of which has much give. Where are those 36-hour days? Such time pressures shape our professional lives and working style.

Surviving in the DI

There are many strategies and techniques for advancing and coping with the daily pressures of professional life in the DI. Each of us has to find and use those that are most "us." Some do's and don'ts are conveyed via orientations, mentoring and training. Other things we have to experience and figure out for ourselves—after all, we are analysts. I have, however, also observed some special characteristics common to most people who "make it" in any organization, the DI being no exception. These simple rules are often easier to admire than to emulate.

Learning From Mistakes

My father often delighted in noting that experience was one of life's cruelest teachers. "What other pedagogue", he would say, "gives you the exam before teaching you the lesson?" I have often reflected on those words after botching something. The exam becomes a powerful lesson. Intelligence analysis demands a certain amount of initiative and risk taking. As a result, mistakes are

inevitable. Those who succeed often seem especially adept at identifying the reasons for a foul-up, including their own, and at avoiding a repetition. While to err may be human, consistently making the same mistake smacks of stupidity.

Imitate What Works

The ability to observe what works and to imitate it is closely related to learning from mistakes. Examples of success are constantly around us and free for the taking. Most successful analysts, for example, learn to master the DI presentational style through imitation. Practicing this rule, however, requires that we not get hung up on the notion of having to do it our way. A mentor of mine once pointed out that "a good idea is a good idea, whether you had it or not." Successful people intuitively seem to understand this wisdom, and they constantly apply it to their own work.

It would be ideal if our careers would move ever upward, with brief and predictable plateaus. But for most of us a career more closely resembles a series of peaks and valleys; there are times when we feel on top of things and times when we feel we have fallen behind. Most of us are good at handling the peaks, but those valleys can be hell.

"Murphy" lives, and he regularly stalks the halls at Langley. There are many Catch-22s in this or any business, and today's success is often followed by tomorrow's failure. Those who make it ride out the tough times by keeping them in perspective and by finding some humor in the ridiculousness of it all. Remember, we are expected to take our work—not ourselves—seriously. Behavioral scientists call this maturity. It can also be thought of as basic survival when all the intelligence, determination, and force of will we can muster is to no avail.

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